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AUTHOR Brand, Alice G.
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ABSTRACT

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Social Cognition, Emotions, and the Psychology
of Writing

Alice G. Brand

SUNY College at Brockport

Brockport, NY 14605

USA

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Social Cognition, Emotions, and the Psychology of Writing

Abstract

Interest in social construction has coincided with a widespread movement to situate the composing process in a social-cognitive paradigm. Because social and emotional themes overlap, writing specialists assume that the emotional components of writing have been taken care of. However, by being absorbed into social themes, the emotional experience in writing remains neglected. This paper summarizes from the standpoint of systematic psychology how our present position on the emotions came to be. It traces the outgrowth of social psychology and its core construct, attitude, from mainstream psychology and the current influence of social construction on composition studies, particularly with respect to emotion. While social cognitive psychology has begun to examine interpersonal emotion, this interest has yet to filter down into the prevailing psychology of writing.

Social Cognition, Emotions, and the Psychology of Writing

It is by now a familiar fact that the emotional dimension of the writing process has been missing in contemporary composition theory. The recent penetration of social themes into professional parlance has eased this problem, providing one believes that social phenomena subsume emotional ones or that the two are synonymous. Because of the very sprawl of social construction theory, the field seems to assume that the emotional experience has been somehow addressed through it. While there is overlap between the terms social and emotional, the opposite has occurred. The terms have inspired confusion in this regard and yielded no greater insight into the emotional component of writing.

I am not sure that writing specialists are aware of why some of this has happened. And it is this story that I want to tell. But I do not want to tell it from the anthropological or philosophical perspective, but from a less familiar one, that of mainstream, empirical psychology. Admittedly, it is a complex history and the connections are unwieldy. But by familiarizing ourselves with it, we can understand how our present position on the emotions came to be.

My intention is to trace briefly how scientific psychology developed and how social psychology (particularly its core concept of attitude) rose out of general systematic

psychology. I then look at how emotions were eased out of early cognitive psychology but found a home in social psychology. Last I address how these developments have influenced composition studies and our thinking about the social and subjective aspects of writing. This story may seem like a long windup for such a modest assertion: that attempts at social cognitive theories of writing mask the emotional experience; and it is this experience that needs to be incorporated into a psychology of writing.

Let me say that by my position I do not mean to hail psychology as the major parent of composition. Nor do I assert that social construction theory single-handedly gave birth to its pedagogical counterpart in collaborative learning or to emotions psychology. These histories are longer and far more complex than that (Brand, 1989; Gere, 1987). Clearly, we can understand peer writing groups without understanding the history of social psychology. But what we don't understand is why emotions have no place in composition theory despite the fact that emotions are integral to social psychology, an influential progenitor of social construction. For despite the fact that social cognition provides substantial information about writers, it seems at the same time to give us more ammunition to avoid studying their emotional experience. Given our interest in the social aspects of writing, legacies from general and social psychology and their connection to emotion are relevant and instructive.

The Beginnings of a Self-Conscious Psychology

With only isolated breaks in twentieth century paradigms, until recently cognitive themes have accounted for the mind at written work. It has been a closed system. Little was missing, little slipping between the cracks or lapping messily over the sides. Virtually no social motifs. Surely no affective ones.

This was not the case in psychology. With roots trailing subcutaneously back two millenia, cognitive themes dominated formal thinking about thought. But as elaborate theories of the intellect were formulated, corresponding theories of the emotions, though mostly unfavorable, were also worked out (Brand, 1980). Concurrent with the emergence of psychology as a self-conscious system at the end of the 19th century, Bain (1864, 1875), the first British psychologist in all but name, carried forward the seventeenth-century Cartesian dualism between the mind or intellect and the body or emotion and contributed, interestingly enough, theories of both rhetoric and emotion. He exhorted his readers to recognize the importance to the intellect of the noncognitive factors of will and emotion.¹ While the first experimental psychologist, Wundt (1896/1907), enunciated three dimensions of emotions and compounded them like a chemist, Bain argued for their primacy (an issue still active), Watson hypothesized three of them, McDougall (1921) several more, Darwin (1894) announced their universality among living things, and Freud

declared anxiety the bete noire of them all. Because Darwin's research was empirical and geographically far-reaching, his of all was a penetrating if not heretical claim.

But in the early decades of the twentieth century the adaptive view of the emotions was deeply undercut by the psychoanalytic psychologies whose legacy was the medical model. Every psychology of that era had something to say about emotion. And it was usually negative.

Like psychology in general, up to the twentieth century, theories of the intellect were also psychologies of the individual (Boring, 1957). Apart from perpetuating the interaction of the mind and body, Descartes proposed the idea of "individuated" experiences arising from a complex and vague notion of a free "soul." Coincident with the founding of his famed laboratory in Leipzig in 1879, Wundt's scientific psychology, a hybrid of British and German philosophy and physiology, focussed almost entirely on the "structural contents" of consciousness. They were revealed by introspection and thus were private, mentalistic, and individual.

The Rise of Social Psychology

Just how the individual psychology of the nineteenth century made way for its social spur is difficult to track precisely. But I can speak to some bench marks. Especially relevant here are the constructs of set and attitude, the bases for its eventual claim on emotion.

While social psychology matured into a discipline by the 1930s, it shares an ancestry with emotions psychology that dates back at least to 1908 when experimentalist McDougall's abiding pursuit of his twin interests in social and emotional processes produced An Introduction to Social Psychology. His was a popular book that provided the basis for a nativistic description of human social action. Briefly, to McDougall all human activity, including social activity, was instinctive. For each instinct there was a corresponding primary emotion which was goal-directed or purposive and capable of being modified by experience. McDougall was thus among the first in systematic psychology to connect the social, emotional, and cognitive.

Although as early as 1862 Wundt, who among a generosity of interests, was said to have devoted a phase of his prodigious output to social psychology (Boring, 1957), so far as I can see, his contribution to it lay more with his use of the concept of apperception. In order to hypothesize the contents of consciousness, Wundt appropriated Herbart's concept of apperception. Apperception meant the making conscious of phenomena and the assimilation of these phenomena into a body of conscious ideas, namely, the apperceptive mass--a term that had originated with Leibnitz two hundred years before. It was logical and structured and surely anticipated modern cognitive psychology which later renamed it schemata or schema (Bartlett, 1932). But the term had an attitudinal base.

Although the construct of attitude was not coined by the Wurzburg school of imageless thought, what the school proposed instead served as a conduit between the idea of apperception as a fixed aggregate and the modern day construct of attitude. The school, formed around the turn of the century, represented a counter reaction to Wundt (see Boring, 1957). It claimed that what could not be observed did not exist nor could be included in science. Thoughts were not amenable to observation. Wundt's conscious contents of the mind were an insufficient description of what was there. Furthermore, introspection was an inadequate tool for getting at them experimentally. What else in consciousness legitimately accounted for conscious processes led to the more dynamic idea of set, forerunner of the social psychological tenet, attitude.

The principals of Wurzburg subdivided conscious processes into four intervals, one having to do with the potential consciousness that precedes a conscious course, or a "setting up" within an individual with a particular goal (Boring, 1957, p.404). From set came "conscious attitudes" (Allport, 1935). Feelings and other contents of the mind were neither sensations nor ideas but conscious attitudes. The Wurzburg school popularized other language important to social psychology. Preparation was interchangeable with predisposition and predetermined tendencies, which in turn was linked to attitude, which within a decade replaced set. Most important, predilections toward things meant the way

humans felt about them in general, which were in fact emotions.

Meanwhile in America psychologists McDougall and Tolman (1932) applied purpose to behavior, creating a purposive behaviorism. Insofar as this psychology freely borrowed the language of the Wurzburg school, it also formed part of the conduit to modern social and cognitive psychology. It appropriated attitude to help explain prior experience, preference, values, expectations, and goal-setting. Needs and attitudes were now distinguished. Instincts determined needs, derived needs determined habits, and attitudes determined preferences. And because a preference required a decision about the badness or goodness of things, it was firmly linked to emotion.

To the extent then that set meant attitude the Wurzburg school was largely responsible for a first psychology of attitude, the study of which was declared par excellence the field of social psychology (Allport, 1935, p. 802). It thus paved the way for modern applications of the term. Attitude, a preparedness or readiness for response, came to have behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components. Certainly, social factors would be expected to have a place in the social science of the period, but social factors in combination with emotional ones also had application in personality (Allport, 1937) and cognitive theory (Bartlett, 1932). Ebbinghaus had already brought memory into experimental psychology in 1885. In 1932 British

experimentalist Bartlett animated it by calling it remembering and gave it fuller human meaning through repeated references to its social psychology and its affective and attitudinal properties.

Although the actual data of social psychology were anthropological and comparative rather than experimental (Benedict, 1934; Darwin, 1894; Malinowski, 1944; Mead, 1928), attitudes as general orientations to the world, were popularized by social scientists early in the twentieth century. Sociologist Cooley (1964) and social behaviorist Mead (1964), seminal forebears of contemporary social psychology, established the group as the appropriate unit for psychological analysis. Individuals could be understood only in terms of the behavior of the various social groups of which they were members (Mead, 1934). Both saw the self as a product of society and caused by it. Cooley postulated in the self a "looking-glass I," formed from the ability of the "I" of the mind to objectify itself and reflect on the "me." For Mead the self found its source in a "generalized-other," "the universalization of the process of role-taking" (Morris, cited in Mead, 1934, p. xxviii). To the degree that the self internalized the attitudes of others, it virtually became those others (p. xxxii, 17).

However, of all the constructs jockeying for definition during this period--attitude, introspection, consciousness, attention, selection, perception, emotion, and memory--consciousness and the conduit to it, introspection, became

least useful scientifically. In discrediting consciousness and introspection, mainstream psychology signaled a move to a new, more rigorous mentalism, cognitive psychology. Modern cognitive psychology ultimately salvaged consciousness, used what it could of attitude, and discarded the rest, namely, emotions (Newell & Simon, 1972; Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964; Mandler, 1984). The scope of this article does not include determining whether or not the emotional component of attitude came to inhabit a social world by default or by active pursuit of its advocates. Nonetheless, since the 1930s there has been an inverse relationship between the ascendancy of cognitive psychology and the relevance of emotion to it. Cognitive psychology has viewed emotion two ways: as a dysfunctional response to experience that needed therapy and was therefore a clinical matter or as part of the softer of the psychological subspecialities. Although most major systems have claimed a slice of it, the science of attitude, including its affective aspects, has been unusually congenial to social science, having in fact been taken as precisely the subject of social psychology (Allport, 1935; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 43).

Let me note in passing that to this theoretical climate were added the world wars. Social psychology in its golden age was the appropriate discipline to address the social and emotional disabilities produced by them. Ideas about mental hygiene had already been promulgated during the 1920s. While the goal of the medical model for psychological health

remained the problem of the mental disease of individuals (White, 1936, p. 51-52), mental health was becoming more positive and more social. Clinics, social service agencies, and therapists like Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) responded to the zeitgeist with an interpersonal psychology that held social situations squarely at the center of healthy self systems. Thus the constructs, social and emotional (now often hyphenated), were firmly bonded for better or for worse, in sickness, in health, and in the social sciences, where emotions have remained.

Cognitive Studies and Social Construction

Since that time, no matter how much literature accrued, how much their personal lives confirm it, like others in high science, mainstream cognitive psychologists seem to disavow that their own internal experiences derive from anything other than objective realities. Emotions were "interrupts" in the proper study of human mind (Mandler, 1984; Newell & Simon, 1972).

And composition studies has done likewise.

Enter collaborative learning. Through the pioneering efforts of Kenneth Bruffee at Brooklyn College, the social psychology of writing has come to matter. But it has not been a vehicle for the study of attitude, much less, emotion; both seem to have fallen away, emotions further than attitude. It has become the hinge for a catalog of professional models and pedagogical practices such as peer group work, from which writing centers, peer tutoring, and

peer editing immediately sprung. Its historical and theoretical underpinnings came somewhat later to composition studies (Gere, 1987; LeFevre, 1987; Rafoth & Rubin, 1988), a nearly perfect inductive process. But it came -- in the name of social construction theory. Social motifs could account for phenomena that cognitive psychology neglected: audience, situation, community, the zeitgeist, and reality (Fish, 1980, p.171; Rorty, 1979). Our very selves were constituted by circumstance (Bruffee, 1984; Goffman, 1959). The self finds its source in relationships. Or the self and thought are considered public property. The extremist position would believe in an abrogation of self, so constituted by others that it is in effect hollow, a cipher, without them. A reality without others was a reality without meaning.

Social construction theory has spread rapidly through composition studies, intersecting with linguistics, ethnography, literacy, epistemology, hermeneutics, and literary exigesis. On the one hand, critical theory has become more attentive to readers and their projective activities (Alcorn, 1987; Holland, 1975/1980). On the other, the rejection of textual objectivity has meant that formal patterns of literature that were themselves constituted by interpretation--which is produced in thought and, as such, is internal and individual-- were at the same time social, because interpretation relies on communities. The reflexive experience of the intellect thus found its corresponding social one.

Social construction has introduced an important relativism and provisionality into writing theory, a healthy instability (because of a healthy loss of faith in hard-core reality). On the face of it, social construction has remained fairly independent of, if not antagonistic to, cognitive psychology. Social learning themes versus information processing themes. The group versus the individual. Social constructionists pay attention to the collective act. Cognitivists work with the individual act. Bruffee (1984) maintains that thought is an artifact of milieu. Cognitivists maintain that it is an "essential attribute" of the mind (p. 640). Rorty (1979) claims that knowledge is driven by consensus. Geertz (1983) envisions "cognition, emotion, motivation, perception, imagination, memory" as communal affairs (p. 153). Cognitivists claim that knowledge is driven by the cognitive apparatus. Social construction takes individual private purpose and makes it public and interactive.

Indeed, despite its apparent link to social psychology, social construction seems as remote and depersonalized as its reflexive counterpart. Cognitivists disallow the writer's subjective experience. So it seems do the social constructionists--at least the way it is now envisioned. Emotions are apparently there, but composition theory (and writing courses) shouldn't be bothering with it.

The emotions suffer curious afflictions. They make their bed in social psychology. They remain at the center of

clinical endeavors. They are only a smattering of their natural selves in social construction. And they remain untouched by cognitivists. Because emotions are believed to need "correcting" through therapy and therapy is the nomenclature for a treatment model, emotions are considered a disease that needs curing. Because they are experienced internally and individually, emotions conflict with social themes. To the therapy issue we have only to read the record. Bruffee (1981) and Moffett (1982), who ardently reject the therapeutic nature of writing in academic contexts, are counterbalanced by Gebhardt (1980), Murray, (1985), and Rico (1983), who give its salutary benefits a saner nod and then move on to its educational values. Having lived so much of life, Rohman (1985) speaks of coming to terms with it, transcending one's experience by writing. It takes guts to come out and talk candidly about the emotional ebb and flow of collaborative learning and writing.

But this is not a story with a bad ending. Unable to ignore the persistent knocking, the donor psychology has recently opened the door to subjective experience. Some cognitive psychologists have adopted a stance that has brought the cognitive and the emotional into a more convivial relationship. The recent coupling of cognitive psychology and social psychology is called social cognitive psychology (or the other way around). And this psychology makes room for interpersonal affect (Fiske, 1981; Hastorf & Isen, 1982; Wyer & Srull, 1989). Social cognitive psychology

has taken interpersonal emotion in off the streets, so to speak, though on strictly cognitive terms. It has been scrubbed of its psychodynamic germs and provided with the rights and privileges of left brain rationality. It has also been subjected to similar constraints--some reasonable (e.g., Attitudes, judgments, and beliefs are considered cognitive surrogates for feelings.), others inadequate (e.g., The arousal, valence, intensity, and duration of emotion are ignored because cognitive structures were not built to handle them.).

Cognitivists and social constructionists in composition studies have lagged behind their parent field in this regard. As they now read, both seem similarly vacant of personal sentiment. Maybe that is why cognitivists in composition have begun to recognize the sociology of writing (Flower, 1989). But how may this acknowledgment be interpreted? I am not sure whether it means that the cognitive paradigm has finally made a place in its system for the interpersonal life or whether it means that the distinction between the cognitive and the social is simply more palatable than that between the cognitive and emotional (Hayes, 1988, p.102; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 6). Or perhaps the term, social, is a convenient gloss on and gloss over the emotions. In other words, are social themes a red herring, a way to divert attention from emotional ones? Social constructs do not intrude on cognitive structures. What's more, they can keep emotion at bay or absorb it,

thereby rendering intellectual processes whole and unharmed. One of my chief concerns is that, if taken to its logical end, emotion is destined to theoretical oblivion. We feel it but we don't conceptualize it (Bruffee, 1986, p. 783).

On balance what have we gained by addressing social construction? Do we eliminate the need to examine the emotions in describing the composing process? To the extent that social construction informs composition theory with broad ideas about social process, it has irreversibly pushed back the frontiers of current theory. To the extent that social construction has introduced social emotion into the current paradigm, I must say no. Social cognitive psychology has made it possible for cognitive theorists to consider interpersonal emotion, but little of this has filtered down to the prevailing model of writing. The field seems slow to disturb the disciplinary state of affairs. Bartholomae (1985) has stated that the fact that "writing problems are also social and political is not to break faith with the enterprise of cognitive science" (p.143). We do not need to apologize to cognitive psychology for our forays into social or emotional processes. Nor do we compromise ourselves by including interpersonal emotion in our sociocognitive thinking. Emotional processes are not hostile to cognitive or to social ones. They are profoundly complementary.

As for the relationship between the social and subjective experience of writers, context may be a lens through which we routinely peer. It may be the mirror and

the lamp of emotion. But I do not think it is a replacement for it. We are not a glassy essence, as Rorty puts it, of group think. The source and sustenance of our emotions may be derived from what Bruffee calls "the conversation of mankind," but that does not make our feelings less "real" than those conversations. I sometimes wonder which is the bigger fiction: the emotions we experience in our heads that is outside the realm of discourse processing; or the conversations that we have with an audience that is sitting in them. If we defer to social imperatives, do our feelings go away? Brodkey (1987) maintains that just because we write alone does not mean that writing is asocial--an important and useful point. But when we are poised in a reflexive stance with our ideas, we are a community of one. When we sit at our desk, when we write at our computers, we are in the end alone-- as we may well need to be. Writing by ourselves is far more than simply a convenience or dislocated speech (Bruffee, 1981). It is downright practical. We learn and rehearse our social and personal selves. We get our work done. We may acquire and negotiate the writing through what Brodkey calls "scene," but only one person ultimately holds the pencil at a time. We may carry our audience in our heads, but, as Elbow (1987) eloquently asserts, we must occasionally keep it out in order to be in touch with what we have to say. It may take great mental agility to close the door on audience, even temporarily, even half way. Yet many of us know that any small effort to

abandon audience at critical junctures in our writing can make an enormous difference in it. We calm the outside so the inside can be heard. And that means listening closely to what we really mean to say, no matter what. Scene can get in the way, that is, if writing is truly to be an act of courage.

Writing is one of the most common, observable results of cognizing. But sheer writing ability, training, and social imperatives do not render the psychology of writing complete. Nor does conflating social and emotional processes. On the contrary, they should be distinguished and explored for their descriptive, explanatory, and predictive powers. And then their interaction. Acknowledging their relationship is a start. But it is not enough. Right now, the social construction perspective is an orientation, a world view, just like the emotional, both almost totally uncharted in composition studies.² Social patterns of discourse need to be delineated as do affective ones. When it comes to emotion, it seems that social construction has more in common with cognitive psychology than with social cognitive psychology. But if composition specialists profess loyalty to social construction, it behooves them to consider the complete social agenda. And that means considering interpersonal emotion. To give the affective dimension still greater utility, those emotions not directly interpersonal should also be examined. Some of that work has already started (Aylwin, 1985; Brand, 1989; Hidi & Baird, 1986). It

thus remains for us to reconcile the cognitive and the emotional structures of written discourse, specify the social and the emotional processes, and factor them all into a common conceptual framework.

Composition studies has put forward a sociology but not a theory of emotion to which it can be genuinely hospitable. Nor do I propose one. The greatest gift we have received from Suzanne Langer is her assertion that the whole of the mind, including language and presentational thought, evolves from feeling. The political ramifications of anything else are irredeemably grim. The belief that sheer intelligence and rationality can solve anything reinforces the mental life of bureaucrats and technicians. Political history has demonstrated that the utter reliance on the cognitive and intellectual or on the blunt force of the communal can be tragic if not fatal. In a world that is tumbling headlong over its own cruelties, listening to our feelings is the least we can hope for.

Footnotes

1. Motivation, known in the eighteenth century as the will and part of the tripartite division of the mind that included the intellect and emotion, is another construct desperately needing systematic study and clarification in composition studies.
2. The cognitive position on writing is further along both in representing a particular world view and in differentiating and elaborating on it.

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